

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

St Nicholas Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School and Nursery	
Six Hills Way, Stevenage, Hertfordshire, SG2 0PZ	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Diocese	St Albans
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Name of multi-academy trust	N/A
Date of inspection	17 March 2017
Date of last inspection	7 March 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Primary and Nursery - 117456
Headteacher	Sarah Stevens
Inspector's name and number	Lilian Weatherley 42

School context

St Nicholas is a smaller than average primary school with a nursery. There are 207 pupils on roll. As the only church school in Stevenage the school serves seven parishes but has close links with the parish of St Andrew and St George. The majority of pupils come from Christian homes but those attending Anglican churches are in the minority. There is an above average proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds. 46% of pupils speak English as an additional language and there are over 20 different languages spoken. The proportion of pupils supported through the pupil premium funding is below average as is the proportion of pupils with special educational needs.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Nicholas Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School and Nursery are outstanding

- The school fully integrates the diversity of its pupils into a Christian family environment strongly underpinned by Christian values, prayer and worship.
- The quality of the school worship and its impact on the whole school community are strengths of the school.
- There are effective close links between the school and the seven parishes it serves which enhance pupils' knowledge and understanding of the Anglican tradition.
- Pupils gain a knowledge and understanding of the school as a church school by taking an active role in the monitoring and evaluation the school's distinctive Christian character.

Areas to improve

- Develop the prayer spaces in each classroom to give pupils greater opportunities for prayer and reflection across the curriculum.
- Further raise standards in religious education (RE) by completing the reorganisation of the curriculum fully to embed 'Understanding Christianity' and Godly Play into a scheme of work, together with the new assessment materials.
- Review the school's website to reflect fully the outstanding distinctive Christian character of the school.

The school, through its distinctive Christian character, is outstanding at meeting the needs of all learners

St Nicholas is a rapidly improving church school where distinctive Christian values underpin the daily life of the school. The school's vision 'Inspiring learning to last a lifetime' is fully understood in its true theological context and is rooted in each child being made in the image of God. Standards are rising and pupils in all year groups make good progress. Despite a large building programme staff ensure that pupils learn in a positive, bright and inspirational environment. The school is a values education school and follows a two-year rolling programme on Christian values. Each value is chosen for its links to biblical teaching. Texts are displayed in each classroom and pupils explain how they are able to attach 'post-it' notes to respond. For example, on the value of Christian charity, 1 John 3 v. 17-18, one pupil posted 'charity means selflessness and giving to those less fortunate'. Pupils are also keen to explain how they receive values marks and a special 'values award' postcard for demonstrating a key value. All pupils feel safe and the school has received the safeguarding standards award. Pupils enjoy school and see the school as a friendly Christian family. 'I think the school has a friendly feel, encouraged by our monthly values.' These Christian values have a key impact on pupil behaviour, which is excellent. Pupils are polite, well mannered and confident. They have a strong sense of pride in their church school.

The Christian values promote and support pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development, which is a strength of the school. The school day is punctuated by opportunities for prayer and reflection, and creativity is high on the school's agenda. Relationships across the school community are exemplary and based on mutual respect. Teachers and learning assistants work well together to support the pupils. The Lent trail observed was an excellent example of this team-work, giving pupils various stations to stop and reflect. 'We have a Lent trail which is a good time to reflect.' Pupil voice is strong and pupils gain confidence by their inclusion in decision-making, monitoring and evaluation of the school's distinctive Christian character. They understand the importance of service and their role within the community. For example, members of Year 6 are chosen to sit on the 'Stevenage Pupil Parliament'. The school recently won an award for recycling to be displayed on dustbins in Stevenage. Pupils understand the importance of charitable giving, which is high. For example, the 'making a difference day' raised £643 for a special care unit at Lister Hospital.

RE has a high profile in the school and the quality of the teaching and learning make a significant contribution to the school's Christian character and pupils' SMSC development. Diversity is celebrated. There is a high level of cultural diversity within the school community itself with over twenty different languages. Much takes place to ensure that those pupils for whom English is an additional language are fully integrated. The recent International Day organised by the pupils and parents was a huge success and learning experience. It enabled participants to share in a selection of activities and food represented by the different cultures in the school. In addition, pupils' cultural development is augmented by close and effective links with the Lady Tait Primary school in Kadoma.

In the words of the incumbent, 'this is a school with the Christian ethos at its heart but it looks out to the world. Pupils are nurtured and grow quickly. It's hard to replicate the school's excellence.'

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Collective worship is a strength of the school and central to the school day. Carefully planned by the headteacher and the incumbent, it is rooted in theology and liturgical pattern. As a result, pupils have an excellent knowledge and understanding of Anglican faith and practice. Evidence shows that worship includes biblical material linked to the school's Christian values. Themes raise pupil aspirations, and the opportunities for prayer and reflection strongly support pupils' spiritual development.

Pupils have regular opportunities to plan and lead worship, to which parents are invited. Parents speak highly of these events including the excellent Year 2 worship observed. All pupils and parents were engaged in this worship and showed obvious enjoyment. Pupils responded well and were clearly eager to support the Year 2 pupils. The hymn-singing observed was outstanding and all pupils sang 'Here I am Lord' in a respectful and moving manner.

Pupils benefit from regular use of the local parish church of St Andrew and St George. Recent examples have been the 'ashing' service for Ash Wednesday and the Lent Trail as a focus on spiritual learning in preparation for Easter. There is a clear worship policy and worship is regularly monitored and evaluated. Older pupils monitor their worship and make challenging and thought-provoking comments and questions. 'The value was explained in the worship but their voices could be a little louder.' This feedback enables the leadership constantly to re-evaluate their provision and move forward. For example, there is a half-termly Eucharist but with the diverse intake of the school, senior leaders and the incumbent are currently reviewing the whole pattern of Eucharistic worship to include confirmation classes for Year 6 pupils. Pupils know key Christian prayers and greetings and have an age-appropriate understanding of the Trinity. The regular worship led by the incumbent is a popular event. One parent said, 'all three of my children are very fond of Father Chris Bunce and find him an inspiration'.

The school serves seven Anglican parishes but the diverse intake of the school means that the pupils have a variety of Christian backgrounds. Worship encompasses the many varieties of worship traditions within the school and pupils benefit from a rich pattern of visitors and worship from across these Christian traditions.

Pupils have opportunities for prayer and worship throughout the day. They see the importance of prayer in their daily lives and respond well. Good use is made of the prayer spaces in each classroom for RE and worship but there is little evidence of how these are used in a wider context.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Standards in RE at St Nicholas are above the national average and in some cases higher than in other subject areas. Pupils have an excellent knowledge and understanding of the Christian tradition and the other faiths studied. Many pupils come from Christian families and are eager to share their personal views and faith with other pupils and adults, which gives an added dimension to their learning.

The quality of teaching and learning is never less than good but the introduction of the 'Understanding Christianity' programme has given staff a much greater challenge. The result is that some teachers still lack confidence with the materials. The headteacher is the RE subject leader and ensures that monitoring and evaluation is rigorous. She is eager to move through this trial period and incorporate the 'Understanding Christianity' units fully into a new scheme of work. With the demise of levels assessment is another area of transition. Although staff have been successfully using the old system they are also piloting the Hertfordshire model for RE to link it to the new units of work.

In November 2016 the school was awarded the RE Quality Mark Silver Award. This reflected the effective scrutiny, tracking, monitoring and evaluation of the subject. Photographic evidence is a key part of practice and the resulting folder reveals an excellent commitment to the subject.

The school is currently undergoing training in Godly Play, which will be introduced to younger classes. This is proving very popular with the pupils. 'We do Godly Play in RE. We have fun.'

Planning is detailed and the RE curriculum provides opportunities for pupils to make links within and between the faiths. There are clear learning objectives and success criteria, which are transferred to pupil books. Pupils know what to do to make progress. They enjoy RE and are proud of their RE books. Work is well presented and well marked, providing clear guidance and feedback.

The planning shows clear links with the school's values and opportunities for pupils' SMSC development are evidenced in each lesson. Enquiry and opportunities for reflection are a key part of the practice.

There are regular visits to church which support pupils' spiritual development. Pupils enjoy these; 'I like the church because when it was the Easter Journey last year it was amazing because we went round the church seeing all kinds of wonderful things'. Links with other Christian churches are growing and now include the Grace Community Church and the community of Mountain of Fire and Miracles. Pupils benefit in RE from a range of visitors to the school from different Christian denominations and parents from other faith communities. The school is an outreach community and in January pupils' work on the Holocaust was displayed in the Stevenage Museum. Visits to other faith communities are less frequent. When asked what they might like to improve one pupil suggested, 'we could go on a few more RE trips'.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the school as a church school is outstanding

The last Ofsted report 2016 stated: 'The headteacher has successfully driven forward improvements on several fronts since her appointment in January 2015'. This sentiment is echoed by staff, parents and governors. Parents are full of praise for the ways in which the headteacher has improved the distinctive Christian character of the school and created a positive learning environment. All issues from the previous report have been addressed and Christian values, prayer and worship now underpin the daily life of the school.

There is a clear vision and mission statement rooted in Christian values, which all members of the school community articulate fully. Both are visible and displayed throughout the school. Governors and parents are clear that the school's Christian values have impacted the pupils' behaviour and aspirations at school and at home. Parents talk of the 'moral gravitas' the Christian values provide.

Governors are regular visitors to the school and know it well. They are ambitious for the school's future. Church school effectiveness is a key priority, evidenced in the school improvement plan.

Following the Ofsted inspection (May 2016) continuing professional development is at the heart of school improvement, with middle leaders now taking national qualifications to improve their practice and leadership skills. They now also offer support to other local schools.

Governors and staff have also received diocesan training. Alongside the diocesan health check in January this has had a significant impact on the school's strategic direction and decisions made. For example, RE has been a priority for the last two years. Funding for RE is good and there are two effective RE governors. Staff have regular termly meetings for RE and all staff and the incumbent have recently undergone training in 'Understanding Christianity'.

Links with all seven parish churches are strong as are links with the diocese. The vice chair of governors is the deputy diocesan director of education and ensures that governors are kept fully briefed on local diocesan and national Church of England issues. The school is regarded as a key focal point for the community. Prayer mornings and deanery meetings are now held in the school and there is an active parents' forum.

The headteacher is currently responsible for the school's website and keeps it up to date with a comprehensive diary of events and images. However, it undersells itself and does not fully reflect the outstanding distinctive Christian nature of this inclusive church school.